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# Contextualised approaches to widening participation: a comparative case study of two UK universities

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**Abstract** This article reports on institutional research at two contrasting UK universities, each with different foci in relation to widening participation (WP). The researchers sought to explore senior staff perspectives on the WP agenda at a time of unprecedented uncertainty and turmoil in the UK higher education sector. The research consisted primarily of interview data from university leaders responsible strategically for WP activity. The findings offer a nuanced narrative of the policy and practice of widening participation at two contrasting universities. Researchers found that the WP discourse itself is perceived as confused and discredited. Viewing ‘widening participation students’ as a homogenised group risks both the benefits of differentiated responses through discipline or subject areas and the benefits of more student-centred measures of success.

**Key terms:** strategy; discipline; leadership; policy; practice; comparative.

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## Introduction

The term ‘widening participation’ (WP) became understood in England from 1997 onwards as a New Labour government policy agenda around social mobility, although efforts to widen the social base in higher education (HE) can be traced back to the Robbins Report (1963). However, for the last 15 years universities have had a critical role in enabling non-traditional learners from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds to access HE as a stepping stone to professional employment and improved socio-economic advantage. University student numbers

expanded significantly in this period, supported with a range of new (targeted) funding streams for students from backgrounds under-represented in HE (Harrison, 2011).

In England, students who are the focus of this WP activity include non-traditional learners such as those with:

- black or minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds
- disabilities
- disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds
- no prior family background in HE
- a background in the care of Local Authorities
- opportunity to study only part-time
- non-traditional qualifications.

The WP agenda has also sought to address gender imbalance across the disciplines and the needs of mature students returning to study. New universities (the former polytechnics and colleges of higher education granted university status since 1992) in particular attracted higher levels of funding according to their intake of students in WP target groups in this period. Specific resource was made available for targeted outreach (access) and retention to support students through the student cycle. English universities are accountable to the government for these funding streams through an annual reporting process that tracks progress towards widening access and improving retention.

The election of a Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government in May 2010 led to a change of funding priorities in HE, resulting in: the termination of central funding for access and outreach networks; the diminution of the Educational Maintenance Allowance; and (crucially) the accelerating shift from public to private funding of universities (through the raising of student fees) alongside an 80% cut in teaching grant. The relationship between the government, the universities and students has undergone a seismic shift since 2010. More rigorous monitoring of an increasingly constrained WP resource is expected, driven by requirements for an approved annual Access Agreement between higher education institutions (HEIs) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA)<sup>1</sup> with measurable targets for access and retention. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) also requires HEIs to submit a triennial WP strategic assessment framework.

However, while the rhetoric of WP remains, the effect of average university fees of £8,300 per year on students from WP backgrounds is likely to be detrimental to the sustainability of fair access (Moore et al., 2011). We hypothesised that the leadership perspectives at both the School (Faculty) level and the institutional

level, as well as in student support structures, are likely to be major determinants affecting how WP is conceptualised and translated into practice as part of the university's mission. To investigate the extent to which WP has been mainstreamed, this research drew on senior stakeholder interviews to explore emerging tensions at a time of change, between a passing 'golden age' of WP, in which generous resources flowed in support of a national strategy, and an emerging 'austere' age in which the architecture underpinning WP is being drastically dismantled and a very different business model of student fees is being introduced.

The research reported here was conducted at a specific time during the recent changes to the higher education landscape in the UK. Interview data were collected between February and April 2011, which fell in the middle of two important policy developments. The interviews followed the government's acceptance of the report of The Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, which had the effect of allowing institutions to increase tuition fees to a new maximum of £9,000, and the announcement that the higher education funding body for England – the HEFCE – would be making drastic cuts to the teaching grant given to institutions. Interestingly, the interviews preceded the publication by the coalition government of the Higher Education White Paper in June 2011, which set out government proposals for future funding of the sector.

## Institutional contexts

### University of Northampton

The University of Northampton is a new university in the English East Midlands, with an explicit strategic mission to 'transform lives'. It is committed to improving the region's economic, social and educational outcomes. The diverse impacts of widening participation activity are reflected by the outcomes of a range of outreach activities, data on the diversity of learners, the breadth of courses and delivery modes offered, and success in retention and achievement of students. As the only university in the county, the majority of its students are drawn from a 50-mile radius. The university now has nearly 14,000 students studying across six academic schools, most studying face-to-face on campus. A high proportion of learners are mature students from socio-culturally diverse local backgrounds (many as first generation entrants to HE), characterised by growing numbers of home BME and international students. Over half the student body is from middle-to-low income backgrounds and 98% studied at state schools. The university also delivers Foundation degrees through four strategic further education (FE) college partners. In the professional areas, the university has seen significant growth in part-time, work-based learning.

Within the UK HE sector, Northampton is regarded as a successful WP university as shown by its position at the top of the *Guardian* league table (2011) for ‘added value’, which measures the academic journey students have travelled since joining the university. However, the university does not fare as well in other university rankings, which focus on research. A new Vice Chancellor joined in September 2010, resulting in a new strategic business plan and leading to structural change and mission repositioning. A priority is to climb significantly up the university league tables. These internal changes coincided with unprecedented volatility in the HE sector around university funding, providing an opportune moment for this research.

## The Open University (OU)

The OU is the United Kingdom’s only university dedicated to distance learning. The university has an open access policy, and for most courses no previous educational qualifications are required. Teaching is undertaken through a supported open learning model. Students learn in their own time and place by reading course material, working on activities and assignments and sometimes working with other students. The use of ICT is becoming increasingly important, and elearning is now central to course delivery. Students are supported by a named academic tutor, by advice and guidance from their regional or national centre, and by support from centralised services such as the university library. The university has approximately 150,000 undergraduate and 30,000 postgraduate students. Nearly all the OU’s students are studying part time, and 70% are in full-time employment. More than 25,000 students live outside the UK, some studying directly with the OU and some studying through partnership institutions.

Over time, the OU’s UK student population has become increasingly diverse. It now closely mirrors the socio-economic composition of the UK’s population as a whole, with 10% black and minority ethnic students, more than 10,000 disabled students and an estimated 15,000 students for whom English is not their first language. (Hart et al., 2010:1)

Although the OU is perceived as having widening access and participation inherent in its mission due to its open access policy, it has frequently acknowledged that simply allowing anyone who wishes to study at HE level to do so does not mean that all groups in society necessarily will study, or that they will necessarily succeed in study (McIntosh, 1975; Simpson, 2006).

The OU also has a new Vice Chancellor (as of 2009) with significant international business leadership experience (Newman, 2008). While re-confirming the institutional commitment to WP and the institution’s core social justice mission, the OU is set to pursue growth in international markets and move increasingly to online learning environments. This research was thus conducted at a pivotal period, as internal and external conceptions of WP were shifting.

## Literature – researching institutional responses to widening participation

In the UK, the term ‘widening participation’ has many different meanings and understandings, depending on the context. Jones (2008:1) highlights ‘potentially rather contrasting positions found in this area of HE policy’ and draws attention to the variety of connected terms with which WP has relationships, identifying:

**Diversity:** although used interchangeably with WP, it can also signify specific areas of policy separable from those associated with generic practices of WP. For example, because this latter idea began its usage with a focus on class and socio-economic status, diversity may be used to indicate activity to address other aspects of under-representation, particularly ethnicity.

**Inclusion:** while this term may be used to signify policies and practices to facilitate entry for all types of under-represented groups, it is currently used primarily in relation to tackling issues linked to disability.

**Equality:** this is usually used in relation to equality legislation, which now requires HE institutions to develop and implement equality schemes in relation to race, disability and gender.

**Equity:** this is a term used primarily in Australia for engaging with under-representation in HE (e.g. indigenous people, but also those from lower socio-economic groups and the disabled) (see e.g. DEET, 1990) in HE.

It is our assertion that these different concepts in reality converge in activities that are collectively referred to as WP and are the focus of WP strategy at both institutions. Figure 1 therefore serves as a reminder that WP shares a porous border with many of these concepts.



**Figure 1:** Variety of terms often associated with widening participation activity

Although there is only a limited literature on institutional responses to WP, the issue has been approached in a number of ways, from large-scale reviews of institutional responses through, for example, Widening Participation Strategic Assessments (WPSAs),<sup>2</sup> to detailed critical reviews of a small number of institutions' responses.

Thomas et al. (2010) provide a thematic review of 129 WPSAs submitted to the HEFCE. The authors' expressed aim is to deliver 'a thematic review across the WPSAs rather than to review and analyse the individual institutional documents' (2010:15), and to focus analysis on the mainstreaming of widening participation activity, citing an HEFCE review calling for 'cultural change and the organisation, management and leadership changes that go with it' (HEFCE, 2006, cited in Thomas et al., 2011). The authors reflect:

in our analysis we are reviewing what institutions tell us in their WPSAs. In reality there may be additional information that institutions have not reported and, furthermore, that implementation may not necessarily be the same as they state in their strategies ... The intervening period between the WPSAs' submission and the publication of this report has coincided with substantial changes in the HE sector and beyond, including the student number control, severe reductions in funding for the sector and a change of government with new and still emerging priorities for the HE sector, especially in relation to social inclusion issues. (2011:15–16)

Our research aimed to provide a deeper contextualised exploration, through detailed critical evaluation of the perspectives of senior staff about the role of WP. The inclusion of two different institutions was intended to create potential for evaluation of approaches in contrasting environments.

A report reflecting on the mainstreaming experience and outcomes of an institutional change programme for the HEFCE (Action on Access, 2009) highlighted a number of persistent challenges for the participating institutions. Importantly, the report concludes that although institutions ‘demonstrated a commitment to widening participation ... through citing mission statements, detailing current activities and providing details about the profile of the student body’ (2009:18), there were concerns that:

for some institutions WP is intimately connected to their mission in terms of recruiting sufficient student numbers [whereas] for others the concern is ... ensuring that the brightest and best students are recruited.

The present study aims to consider these concerns in more depth, choosing to focus on two (contrasting) higher education institutions. This study’s senior stakeholder interview methodology offers scope to probe such complexity – what has been referred to as ‘the way ... widening participation policy “migrates” from government and HEFCE through to institutional policy’ (Greenbank, 2006a).

Greenbank (2006a) reflects on research that focuses on ‘how a number of HEIs interpreted, revised and formulated policy on widening participation’ and on ‘the rationale behind institutional policy’ (47). Greenbank (2006b) offers an analysis that identifies individual institutions as having some scope for determining WP policy, although it is constrained by ‘economic and political factors ... setting the boundaries around HEI policy’ (201). An institution’s organisational culture influences institutional policy, and so:

This means that although HEIs operate in the same economic and political environment, institutional differences in organisational culture mean that different policy responses emerge. (2006b:201)

Greenbank also considers the relationship between the economic realities faced by HEIs and WP policy at institutional level and cites evidence suggesting that strategic frameworks and plans are focused on students representing greater ‘rates of return’, such as postgraduate students and overseas students, and that expanding provision of Foundation degrees is ‘based on economic grounds rather than widening participation’ (2006b:204–5). He develops both ideas and concludes by calling for more sophisticated analyses:

an analysis of institutional responses to widening participation that takes into account economic forces, political factors and the mediating influence of organisational culture provides a better, if more complex, explanatory framework within which to work. (2006b:211)



We concur and have adopted an analytical frame that offers scope for the consideration of economic, political and organisational forces.

In addition, commitment to WP at the individual or personal level is an area that has received scant attention in the literature. In one contribution, Macleod et al. (2005) highlight a key gap in the literature on operationalising WP (the policy-to-practice implementation gap), especially concerning the importance of exploring individual leaders' perspectives on WP in order to comprehend how policy is understood and translated in an institutional context. Stevenson et al. (2010) support an assertion that WP is 'a discourse which is a contradictory and unstable amalgam of economic rationality and social justice argument' (105). They report a case study, built from documentary research and interviews with staff at one institution, suggesting that personal values dominate, overriding the rhetoric and practice of WP. The research reported here used a similar methodology in order to unearth leaders' personal perspectives on WP at two contrasting HEIs.

## Methodology

Greenbank (2006a) reports on the methodological considerations associated with a larger scale but, in many important respects, similar piece of research 'focused on the rationale behind institutional policy' (47), providing a brief but useful account in support of a case studies method, a flexible but focused interviewing style and practical ways to draw on national/governmental and local/institutional documentary evidence that offers a form of triangulation.

Greenbank draws on Stake (1995) and Stenhouse (1978) to outline an approach to interviews that allows for the individual voices of each interviewee unfettered by a rigid interview schedule and that also allows for the individual context and combination of interviewee, interviewer and institution. Questions, as in Stenhouse, take the form of an 'interview guide'.

Our study draws from a rationale similar to this but is balanced with a concern for the collection of comparable data. Researchers agreed the wording of an interview schedule to be conducted in both institutions. In order to access a cross-institutional view on WP from strategic leaders, exploratory interviews captured individual narratives around WP engagement, highlighted different understandings and provided personal perspectives with examples. A semi-structured interview approach enabled a probing of personal and professional issues important to key individuals.

Senior staff with strategic responsibility for WP or senior discipline leaders were approached by the authors to be participants in the study. The roles of those interviewed in each institution reflect the institutional frameworks adopted. Interviews at the University of Northampton focused on the Vice Chancellor, Pro-Vice Chancellor and the Deans of the six Schools (Faculties), whereas interviews at the OU focused on senior staff at Unit Director levels (senior national and

regional staff, staff leading Equality and Diversity, student services and a WP unit dedicated to widening participation through curriculum development) rather than Faculty-based staff. The range of responses from each institution inevitably reflects the differing roles in each university.

Eight interviews were conducted at Northampton and nine at the OU between February and April 2011. Each lasted about 45 minutes, was digitally recorded and was subsequently transcribed by the researchers. The interview question areas had been sent to interviewees in advance, to facilitate best utilisation of the interview opportunity, and allowed colleagues time to reflect on the issues. The authors analysed the transcripts separately for identification and development of key themes, before meeting to share categories and insights and to discuss and reach consensus on differing interpretations. A number of key findings emerged that provided a structure to the developing analysis. Some of these findings are inevitably specific to the institutional context. However, a number of common themes are also identified and discussed below.

Interviewing key strategic actors is common in other areas of educational research (for example, Taylor, 2002), but rarely have senior stakeholder interviews been reported in relation to investigating institutional WP strategies. We adopted an interpretivist approach, drawing on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2001) to construct an understanding of WP with our research participants. In recognising we, as researchers, were not immune to value judgements (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995), we utilised dialogic approaches to tease out meanings to consider the ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004) of WP responses. The interviews were a learning opportunity for participants and researchers, an interchange around themes of mutual interest in which we sought to gain an understanding of the personal values that influenced ideas (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) on WP. In keeping with stakeholder research, we have not identified individual responses.

## Findings

### 1. Widening participation as a conflicted discourse

In asking interviewees to reflect on the relationship between widening access and widening participation (WP), a number of different conceptualisations emerged, reflecting a confusion of terms. One leader at Northampton articulated the lazy way phrases are used concerning WP and picked up on the danger of universities chasing government policy funding drivers, at the expense of a values-driven approach:

I think generally they’re used very interchangeably. I suspect that they shouldn’t be ... So I think one’s got caught up with a sort of government policy thing and the other is a more philosophical position about trying to ensure that those people who haven’t traditionally engaged with HE can do

so, and WP makes you think, when you've actually got them there, do you actually retain them so that they actually achieve ...

Such sentiment was mirrored by an Open University colleague, who stated 'in most universities ... the strategy has been to maximise income and I think that's generally accepted'.

Conversely, colleagues in other professional areas were trenchantly clear in their response, whether on pragmatic grounds:

Widening Access is about recruitment and promotion ... Northampton is a recruiting university so will take anyone who applies who meets entry requirements ... WP is what we do with the students when they are here. We can make a difference through course design, progression, study skills etc. We need to be careful that support is available to all students – tutors cannot tell the backgrounds of their students so it is wrong to assume that specific groups can be targeted ...

or on a social justice rationale:

Widening Access is taking students with the intellectual ability to benefit from university education from non-traditional qualification routes and potentially non-conventional groups in society that may not have had a strong expectation that students would go to university. It's about widening the sociological aspects of people benefitting from going to university ...

Other Deans' conceptualisations of WP were filtered through a discipline perspective:

Widening Access is a subset of WP. Access is doing what we can to make our courses, our learning environments accessible to people who cannot access these. Different types of people and different Schools focus on different groups ... WP is what we do with them once they are here. WP is about achievement, attainment, progression and retention. We have to make sure they get the best possible learning experience, comparable to any other student not from WP background ... The whole idea of WP is to provide adequate support ...

But fundamentally, most key stakeholders shared the view of one leader: 'I still think people don't know what WP is ...'

Nationally, the dynamic terminology debate surrounding WP has also led to the use of new phrases including 'fair access', 'social mobility', 'access to the professions' and 'public benefit'.

This lack of clarity was mirrored by other senior staff:

I'm probably a bit vague on that to be perfectly honest ... they probably seem the same thing to some people and different things to different people ... participation is more to do with ... participating in hands-on, getting people through the door as it were, through some activities, whereas access ... suggests that you're looking at more of a community-based side to WP ...

For OU interviewees, there appeared to be a reasonably clear understanding that widening access related to activity that was focused on individuals entering the institution and that WP was an umbrella term describing work to support students to successful outcomes. However, the link between widening access and widening success was identified as problematic:

By student access we mean students entering the institution by however means they might do that ... But I think at this university ... we have a responsibility to those students who we have encouraged to access this institution to [help them become as] successful as they can be and therefore the strategy is not about maximising the number ... it is actually about the success of those students, probably in an equal measure ...

For the majority of OU interviewees, confusion about widening access and WP in UK higher education was explicitly linked to a perceived lack of central clarity:

So we can't then say 'right, in England, you know the OU WP strategy is to have an access model which is this' and then expect it to work in Wales ... Scotland has slightly different targets and they're very much talking about more work with FE colleges and partnerships. So are we going to do that in England?

However, responses from OU senior staff highlighted the influence of government policy, especially in terms of maximising income through WP:

I also think that we have developed a way that we work at the moment to maximise the benefits of government funding ... at the moment we have focussed on taking a lot of people in at the beginning, because we get a premium of around £1500 per student in particular, targeted students, at the point at which they register ...

This disparate evidence from key stakeholders at both universities, each perceived to be committed to WP, is significant. Despite the combination of pragmatic and values-driven understanding of WP represented across the comments, WP appears to remain a conflicted discourse, an educational space in which contradictory impulses around pre-entry aspiration-raising and university-based support for learning are still not embedded in any coherent way into the strategic approach to WP. This is significant at a time of dramatic HE policy changes, as a tightened resource flow will lead to a cap on student numbers, with WP students being the group most likely to be excluded. The tensions between the student number cap and a social mobility agenda, and between the marketised model of HE and central government imposed HE participation targets are still being played out.

## **2. WP conceptualised and delivered in the discipline**

At Northampton, the conceptualisation of WP at the School/discipline level defines the focus and nature of outreach activity, the design and delivery of the curriculum

portfolio, the range of academic and pastoral student support provided and the assessment strategies used. Interviews with all Northampton's Deans demonstrated clear customisation of the WP agenda in relation to the School's particular subject disciplines and contextual economic drivers. Identified discipline-specific WP issues included:

- The gender imbalance of women in science, technology, engineering and mathematical (STEM) subjects. This was being successfully challenged through a range of funded national and institutional support. Sustained outreach activity with school girls and partner stakeholders over a number of years seems to be having a measurable impact: in 2011 the university saw a 23% increase in women applying for STEM subjects.
- The School of the Arts interviews all students who apply and uses contextual data like portfolios to enable those with potential to enrol on its courses, but as with other Schools, there is an uneven spread of BME students on particular courses.
- The Business School reported attracting diverse learners through offering a variety of courses with work-based learning and sandwich options. The majority of its learners are currently part time, and this mode is expected to be a growing trend with the onset of student fees.

For the Schools offering professional courses such as teaching and nursing, proactively attracting diverse learners was paramount so that public sector workforces reflected the communities they served:

You can ensure you are recruiting in order to achieve a diverse profession, so I think there are strong drivers for a School of Education, connected to developing professionals. You absolutely want to draw from all sections of the community in order to work with children and young people. That's the role modelling. Therefore we have to make sure we have good outreach to make sure we get diverse groups in and then actually differentiate and support according to need so they will actually complete and achieve ...

However, even Deans explicitly committed to WP values saw a particular challenge in widening access in relation to tackling the gender and BME shortages in particular health and education courses:

There are cultural issues with health professions that give personal care to other people, as reflected in our admission of Muslim girls, although this is getting better. Refugees from the Somali and Bangladeshi backgrounds have taken courses although it has required a lot of furthering their English language – this is not helped by the medicalization of language ...

All Deans identified the preparedness of some WP students for HE as a continuing challenge. Generic support is provided for all students across the university, but

these services rely largely on self referral, which could disadvantage WP students who, as non-traditional learners, may not have the confidence to access the support needed. All Schools provide additional tutorial support to boost both the achievement and retention of all students and they try to meet student pastoral needs through signposting to bespoke support services. However, specific WP funding streams to support retention are reported as insufficient to fund all the interventions needed.

All Deans agreed on the importance of implementing the university's inclusive assessment policies to align the needs of WP students and an inclusive curriculum:

a curriculum which focuses the learning outcomes on the needs of students, is well thought through, has a diversity of outputs and the learning outcomes are flexible enough to accommodate a range of student abilities and ways of work ... In assessment flexible strategies recognise different forms of achievement – Less good practice is more prescriptive. We assess a range of outputs ... we're looking for reflection and student learning ...

This discipline lens on WP was less explicit at The Open University, as academic units are not directly represented on the institution's main strategic body for developing strategy for and delivering WP. Faculties are, however, required to engage with the OU's WP Strategy through the development of Action Plans. Interviewees highlighted the link with faculties as an area of historical weakness:

There was not a common understanding of what the role of the faculty was, there was confusion about what widening participation was, and what you might do about it ...

Interviewees did, however, detect improvement from faculties:

they've started to concentrate on curriculum and issues around retention and progression and how you can look at your assessment and your curriculum content or your student support to tutorials to see how that might change and they're focussing on the data and what the data says which they didn't do before because they weren't sure how to use it ...

Interviewees appeared comfortable discussing issues of diversity and its relationship to WP objectives and the curriculum. Most interviewees suggested various issues hindering greater inclusivity in the curriculum, including national and international inclusivity and relevance, which were located in anglocentricity and ethnocentricity:

it's not evidently obvious to me that the assumptions that we will make about student character ... [are not] going to be very different from the assumptions you have to make about the kind of students who you have in Scotland ... and probably different again in Wales. And therefore it doesn't necessarily follow the curriculum, so what you arrive at for one group of students might have pretty negative unintended consequences in terms of ability to operate ...

Concerns such as these were related by one interviewee to a perceived lack of diversity in the staff base:

if only lecturers were a more diverse group: lecturers are also white, female and middle class, but for the systems of student support which are going to be increasingly online I think it is going to be very difficult to match that with responding to diversity ...

Interviewees made reference to the modes of learning offered at The Open University – open distance learning, and blended learning – as supportive of inclusive curriculum:

For some people with disabilities online learning is fantastic, it is much better than face to face learning. If people have very strict religious observance and don't feel they can ... work in a group for whatever reason then online forums provide a fantastic way allowing them to achieve that learning outcome without actually being in a group setting. So I think a blended approach which is what I think we do is the way to support diversity ... We are probably more inclusive than most because ... for online learning you have to make stuff accessible otherwise people just can't use it ...

Policy makers usually divide WP learners using equality categories, but this study suggests that heterogeneous WP 'groups' can also be usefully differentiated through the discipline lens.

### 3. Impact of WP initiatives

Interviewees identified that WP activity can have an impact at a variety of levels: the individual student, the course, the Faculty/School, the university and at a wider societal level. It was also recognised that the actual impact may be difficult to measure unequivocally because of the complexity of educational, economic, social and cultural factors involved, their interplay, and the long timeframes involved. One Dean at Northampton stated that recruitment, progression, achievement and retention are the key individual, group, institutional and sector measures that track the end-to-end WP process.

All the Deans recognised the university's strengths in providing a transformative education, and were ambitious in wishing to track impact beyond the institution into wider society:

The real impact is seeing whether what we are doing is a making a difference to society. The *raison d'être* for us being here is to have an impact on society – in terms of employability it would be good to say that the University's alumni are creating knowledge, affecting the economy, especially if we have this data for WP students ...

However, Deans emphasised the importance of remembering that each student is different, deserves respect and travels a unique path:



labelling people because of their background gives them a disadvantage to start off with. They value this background as part of their history. I grew up in difficult circumstances and this led to who I am, what I am. I don't expect any favours. There's a tension between patting people on the head because they come from a difficult background and treating people as individuals ... We need to recognise what people from a WP background can bring to the future of the nation. This could lead to powerful curricula where universities could be agents of social and political change rather than reinforcing the status quo ...

This quote suggests a values-informed leadership role for universities in making social mobility a reality. Senior staff also had ambitious visions about long-term social mobility:

I think a more radical version of WP ... would be to be much less self-interested in WP for its own sake for a particular organisation ... I'd be much more excited about a much wider project that raises aspiration across the board – not at FE but in primary, where you do drive up aspirations among under-represented groups which by and large are working class boys – and get them to think about a university career anywhere in the world ...

At Northampton WP impact measurement was seen as crucial for both internal purposes and external accountability to students and funders, but there was also recognition of the importance of measuring what is valued, not just 'valuing what can be measured', and indeed a recognition of a need to avoid 'trying to measure things we can't'. Interestingly, following the publication of the HE White Paper, *Students at the heart of the system* (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2011), there will be a greater expectation on all universities to demonstrate the transformative impact of HE, particularly for WP students. In a marketised HE sector, value for money (VFM) and return on investment (ROI) are the dominant metrics that will be used to assess whether investment in WP has had a positive impact.

For interviewees at The Open University, discussions around measuring impact focused on the institutional level and the tensions that exist between collating and reporting on quantitative measures and the need for closer examination or more qualitative measures. Measures of recruitment, completion and achievement at module and qualification level (full qualification and intermediate levels) were seen as inevitable and important. Furthermore, such measures, it was argued, should be used as the starting point, and to guide areas of focus and activity and so highlight evidence of impact:

in terms of impact measures ... we have data about recruitment, we have data about performance that we can link to variables ... we can for example say we've got a problem in this area ... we're not getting many men progressing in this area but lots of women – why is that the case? So we can look at those ... we can look at the data, see where there's a problem and see what we can do to resolve that problem ...



Interviewees were, however, concerned that more qualitative and student-centred measures of impact were built into monitoring of WP activity and strategy. Although the qualitative evaluation of individual projects and initiatives was perceived as widespread and rigorous, its presence in strategic level reporting and monitoring was relatively absent:

the students' view of the impact for them is key but it is very, very qualitative ... it may end [up] only being a line or two in a management paper but it provides reassurance that actually we are getting it right or if we are not we should be flagging things up ...

In terms of WP impact, there was recognition from senior stakeholders at both universities that personal WP journeys build commitment to the transformative power of WP – and that it is important to understand what is meant by success for the individual learner, as well as the institution. In the new, austere funding regime, there will be a changed locus of impact measurement for WP – away from public accountability towards 'private' measures of value for money. WP, although a mid-to-long-term social change qualitative agenda, will need to show evidence of its impact through the quantitative metrics funders favour.

## Discussion and conclusions

In setting out to investigate approaches to mainstreaming WP at two contrasting universities, we have revealed changing notions of WP itself as the respective universities were engaged in reviewing their strategies. Senior staff at Northampton agreed that the term had become a tired cliché suffering from a lack of clarity, with comments highlighting the dangers of association with a deficit model:

[There is] an unfortunate sort of tarnishing of WP, in that it is seen by some in the sector as 'universities who aren't very good' ... WP branding is a problem. We need to be aspirational, and WP doesn't help with that ... I think WP has too much baggage associated with it now as a phrase.

Consequently, the University of Northampton has re-named WP as 'Access and Achievement'.

The OU is now also moving away from the phrase 'widening participation', with its new strategy labelled an 'access and success' strategy, and its former Centre for Widening Participation becoming the Centre for Inclusion and Curriculum. This represents evolution in line with national policy, shifting from a focus on students with low entry qualifications to one positioned to address social disadvantage more broadly:

In 2004, WP at the OU meant something completely different. If you ask the question, 'how were we interpreting WP in our practice?' it certainly wasn't to do with social disadvantage.

The research has highlighted that the measurement of ‘success’ in initiatives to address systematic under-representation in higher education is problematic for institutions. A recent incentive for English HEIs has been to focus on broad measures of social disadvantage (primarily assessed in terms of data on social deprivation linked to postcodes) in order to maximise additional funding from the HEFCE (the primary body for the funding of teaching in HEIs in England, which also distributes some research funds). Similar incentivising funding streams have existed in Scotland and Wales also. However, such an approach has the potential to detract attention away from more nuanced understandings of individuals’ backgrounds, their multiple identities (e.g. as a mature, disabled first-time entrant to HE) and individual experiences. This study has highlighted the importance of defining the success of HE in more individualised terms as an urgent priority that the HE sector needs to embrace if it is to appeal to the breadth of diversity among prospective students. This personalised approach to learning and success chimes with more individualised approaches seen in schools.

We haven’t systematically singled WP students out to kind of monitor their progress through the stages of their learning journey on a module or qualification route. So I think there’s some things that we could do better there ... I’d like us to move to a position where we understand the WP student journey and we are able to intervene at different stages to enable that student journey to continue successfully. (OU)

We’re only going to make so much progress while we’re looking at groups, we need to look at the level of the individual ... needs an individual tracking agenda ... students need to complete well, not just be retained. (Northampton)

Of course there are also much more opportune questions you could ask about impact on the student’s lives and what qualification, whether it be a full degree or an intermediate qualification, and what that does for them. On that I am not aware that we have much grip on at all. (OU)

The tensions that exist in the UK at policy level between broad target measures – for example, around recruitment and degree attainment – and more student-centred measures were identified by interviewees:

With fees, with the new fees environment, and funding environment, fees will go up, and students are going to be intensely interested in what we can do for their economic outlook, and so is the Government. (OU)

The HE White Paper, *Students at the heart of the system*, was published on 28 June 2011 – after the interviews for this research were conducted – and outlined the coalition government’s proposals for the future of the higher education sector. It identifies the same situation of tension as the interviewee quoted above: that the reforms to the fee regimes for the higher education sector in the UK (which have created an even more differentiated fee regime across the four nations of

the UK, with English HEIs now able to charge up to £9,000 for a year of full-time study), accompanied by severely restricted funding for universities, will create an environment in which students will have greater expectations of their study experience and funding bodies will increasingly hold HEIs to account. The White Paper suggests that institutions will be required to offer more information about, for example, contact hours, employability and earnings outcomes, in order to demonstrate to students likely outcomes of their investment. Although such potential requirements fall short of the aspirations of those who call for truly student-centred success measurements, it signals both a convergence of local and national perspective and a shift away from purely high-level and recruitment-focused approaches to 'widening participation'. But at the same time it also signals an environment in which HEIs are held to account by two sources – the policy makers/funding councils and the student body – and these sources may not measure success in the same manner.

This study provides a timely 'snapshot' of institutional perspectives on widening participation at a moment of turbulent change in the higher education sector in the UK. Interviewing senior staff at each research site elicited relevant and authentic data that has enhanced the analysis of the importance of contextual factors in the practices and discourses of WP. In particular, the semi-structured interviews allowed exploration of a values-informed understanding of WP, which illustrated a strong personal and professional commitment to its philosophy and implementation from senior staff, based on their own personal experience.

Three key findings offer a nuanced narrative of local and national socio-economic tensions, and the persistence of commitment to social justice ideals for higher education. The political sensitivity of discourses around widening participation demonstrate a continuing critical stance on under-representation in higher education, which is capable of variable interpretation both by government and central bodies, by individual institutions, and by individuals within institutions. The institutions are conscious of the insufficiency of targets and measures to capture the holistic impact of WP at various levels. Leaders at both institutions recognise the risk of a homogenising approach that creates a deficit 'widening participation student', at the expense of more sophisticated and student-centred measures that reflect the diversity of the student body. The example of discipline- or subject-specific initiatives and activity underlines the importance of resisting the homogenising impulse. This critical insight leads the institutions to lament the lack of such student-centred measures and, combined with the rhetoric of the current HE White Paper, to signal their future commitment to developing a wider range of meaningful quantitative and qualitative measures for student access and success.

Despite unearthing senior staff's active commitment to the principles of addressing under-representation in higher education, all our interviewees detected in the discourse of 'widening participation' an outdated, dangerous and self-defeating deficit model labelling a low-achieving, limited aspiration learner. We recommend

other universities take a fresh look at their approach in the context of their own missions and emerging policy, especially through a lens of conflicting discourse, disciplinary differences and measurements of impact. The key message from senior stakeholders for WP practitioners is to adapt and evolve, or risk extinction.

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## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Office for Fair Access is an independent public body that helps safeguard and promote fair access to higher education in England. It was created following the introduction of higher tuition fees in 2006–2007.
- <sup>2</sup> The HEFCE guidance for Widening Participation Strategic Assessments requires that they contain 'an overarching statement that: identifies the place of widening participation in the institution's forward planning; sets out the overall aims and objectives; includes a high-level statement on admissions; and explains how the institution intends to measure success' and that they should 'set out: the full range of the institution's widening participation activity at an appropriately aggregated level; the detailed targets and milestones; and the level of resource committed to widening participation' (HEFCE, 2009).